

April 24, 2000

Is Clinton right in showdown with NRA over gun control?

Yes: NRA growing more desperate

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Americans who support common-sense gun control measures should be encouraged by the NRA's recent claims about President Clinton willingly accepting shooting deaths to further his political agenda and having blood of gun-violence victims on his hands.

How can those outrageous statements be good news? They reveal the increasingly desperate lengths to which the NRA will go to shift attention away from the weaknesses of our gun laws and the vital need to strengthen them.

The NRA knows it cannot win a contest over these issues on the merits. Vast majorities of the public favor all the reasonable measures the NRA opposes, from closing loopholes in current laws to more fundamental changes like registering handguns and licensing their purchasers.

While widely denounced for the vicious rhetoric, NRA leaders used the controversy as an opportunity to repeat endlessly that we should enforce existing laws rather than enact new ones.

The NRA does not care that its accusations fly in the face of the facts. Gun laws are enforced more vigorously today than when President Clinton took office, with federal prosecutions increasing by 16 percent from 1992 to 1999, and state and local prosecutions climbing at even higher rates.

The NRA's argument wrongly assumes we have to make a choice between strengthening laws and improving their enforcement.

We can and should do both. No one would suggest, for example, that we should stop improving means of preventing terrorism and instead just sit

back, wait until it happens, and then aggressively prosecute those responsible.

Merely enforcing current laws is not enough because the NRA has worked continuously to ensure that those laws are as weak as possible.

For example, only two products sold to consumers, guns and tobacco, are exempt from federal safety regulation. The NRA can take credit for many other deadly legal loopholes, such as those permitting sales without background checks at gun shows, allowing convicted criminals to regain their guns, making it difficult to prosecute corrupt gun dealers, and even making it legal for teen-agers to possess assault weapons.

The NRA has worked equally long and hard to undercut the effectiveness of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the federal agency with primary responsibility for enforcing gun laws.

Condemning its agents as "jack-booted thugs," the NRA has fought to restrict ATF's funding and its ability to carry out its responsibilities. From curtailing inspections of gun stores to denying law enforcement authorities access to records they need to identify and prosecute gun traffickers, the NRA has consistently undermined enforcement of the very laws it accuses the president of neglecting.

If its real concern were enforcement, the NRA would count President Clinton among its best friends. Just this year, he proposed a \$280 million initiative that would put hundreds of additional investigators and prosecutors to work on gun cases. More interested in the rhetoric than the reality of enforcement, the NRA declared it was "skeptical" of Clinton's intentions and dismissed his proposal as doing nothing to "temper his anti-gun zeal."

When it comes to enforcement, the NRA's actions speak much louder than its recent words. We surely have not heard the last of its shameful rhetoric, because the NRA knows it cannot prevail when attention focuses on the real issues and the reasons for strengthening our gun laws in addition to enhancing their enforcement.

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